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## **Toxic river site to receive federal aid**

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Six months after county officials and local congressmen proposed that a hazardous site along the San Jacinto River be placed on a federal cleanup list, the site has now landed on that list and become eligible for federal funds.

The site, off the Interstate 10 bridge near FM 2100 in Highlands, was first discovered by the Texas Parks and Wildlife department in 2005 and reported to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. TCEQ began investigating the site and determined that dangerous levels of dioxin were present, and that the primary source was a now-defunct paper mill.

U.S. Reps. Gene Green and Ted Poe had been lobbying to get the site placed on the National Priority List of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, a list of areas requiring cleanup because they pose a health risk to humans. And Wednesday, the EPA announced that the San Jacinto site, along with two others in Texas, had officially been added to the list.

By landing on the list, the site is now eligible for federal funds if the EPA is unable to determine who indeed is responsible, and force the responsible party to pay. The fund draws from an annual budget of more than \$100 million, and there are now about 1,150 sites on the list.

Harris County judge Ed Emmett, who toured the site in October, said he was thrilled to hear the news that the EPA will now get involved and that the cleanup process will now potentially benefit from superfund monies.

"East Harris county has been the economic engine for the county, but as a result it's borne the brunt of a lot of environmental issues," Emmett said. "I don't want to cast blame or say we should have done this or shouldn't have done that, but the truth is now that we know some of the damages that have been done, and we need to start cleaning it up. And this superfund designation will help us a lot with that."

Stephen Tzhone, an environmental scientist with the EPA and the project manager for the San Jacinto River site, said the EPA would attempt to research the so-called "potentially responsible parties," or those that caused the contamination. Only if they are unsuccessful or if they face legal obstacles would the federal funds be released.

The site consists of three former disposal pits, portions of which are now underwater. It covers about 20 acres, though the waste disposal pits are about 3.5 acres in total size. McGinnis Industrial Maintenance Corp. purchased the pits for storing waste sludge from Champion Paper Co. in Pasadena.

EPA experts will now conduct a more comprehensive investigation, including risk analysis and intensive sampling of water, sediments and wildlife. The next phase, Tzhone said, would be a feasibility study, in which the different cleanup processes would be evaluated for cost, duration and effectiveness. The EPA would suggest a primary solution and alternates in case Plan A doesn't work. Tzhone said a timetable and a potential price tag would be premature.

"It's very preliminary right now," Tzhone said. "It could be all over the place. Some cases have taken years and some less. Some have cost millions and some less. There are just so many unknowns right now."

Despite the uncertainty, Harris County Precinct 2 Commissioner Sylvia Garcia said she was "absolutely delighted" with the EPA's decision.

"There have been a lot of people working very hard to get this done," Garcia said. "The big concern has always been the dioxin levels in the water. We worked real hard as a precinct to post signs to warn people not to fish and at least not eat the fish, especially with the impact to small children and pregnant women."

Dioxins refer to three chemical compounds that are often the product of industrial activity, including the bleaching of pulp and paper, likely the source of the dioxins in question. High exposure can result in skin irritation and even acne, and prolonged exposure at elevated levels has been shown to increase the risks of cancer, and low level exposure can cause reproductive system effects.